DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 479 CS 208 520

AUTHOR Jenseth, Richard
TITLE Finding the Center: The Expressive Reading Journal in the College Classroom.
PUB DATE 28 Mar 84
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (35th, New York, NY, March 29-31, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Prewriting: Reading Improvement; *Student Attitudes; Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); Writing Exercises; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; Writing Readiness
IDENTIFIERS *Journal Writing

ABSTRACT

The expressive reading journal aims to break through student passivity by asking students to write extensively and expressively about what they read, each time they read, and to make discoveries and take possession of what they read. This type of journal in the academic course depends for its usefulness on the nature of expressive language, the language that submits itself to the free flow of ideas and feelings and is relatively unstructured. It is important to teach students the mechanics of setting up a journal, but it is more important to provide them with an atmosphere that encourages their thinking and writing and that provides nonthreatening feedback. As students develop self-confidence, they can read more advanced materials--specifically, the texts they have to interpret for academic learning. As used in the reading journal, expressive language, because it is verbalizing consciousness, can transform objective, distant knowledge into personal knowledge. Whatever form it takes, the expressive reading journal demands from teachers a belief in the heuristic qualities of language; it demands that they help their students see themselves as people who can accomplish learning through writing. (CRH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED246479

Richard Jenseth
Department of English
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa 52240

This paper was delivered at CCCC, New York City, New York, March 28, 1984.

Panel: "The Learning Self: Personal Knowledge in the Academic Classroom"

Paper Title: "Finding the Center: The Expressive Reading Journal in the College Classroom"

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Richard Jenseth
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS208 520

Since I have evoked the name of Michael Polanyi, let me begin by offering one of his many quotable assertions about language: "The whole realm of human intelligence is grounded in the use of language."[1] Then, since I am calling on quotable people, I'll add this thought from James Britton: "Alongside a sense of the importance of language as a means of communication," we must set"a sense of its value to the user."[2] I begin with these two assertions about language and thought because, though my topic is the expressive reading journal in academic classes, the broader issue is one of the most exciting in our field today: writing as learning or, as the popular phrase has it, writing as a way of coming to know.

The answer to the question "Coming to know what?" has become more complex and more challenging as composition has increasingly learned about language from other disciplines-- semiotics, cognitive psychology and epistemological philosophy, to name a few. Coming to know that language, in large part, gives us our world, gives us ourselves. So, while I am talking here about writing done for very practical, utilitarian purposes, I am thinking, too, of how students can use writing to complicate their theory of the world by "weaving into its fabric" the concepts they encounter as they meet their daily academic challenges.[3]

Obviously, many of those academic challenges have to do with reading. So often our students have not been successful readers; they do not read their own writing well, and they read their literary and academic texts poorly, with little hope of making what they read their own. In part, they struggle because they have not found a means of expression which will allow them to establish a personal realtionship with what they read. They will lapse into passive reading, hours spent looking at the pages with few insights to stimulate further reading. The expressive reading journal aims to break through this passivity by asking students to write extensively and expressively about what they read, each time they read, be it ten tough pages or an entire chapter. The reading journal is a place where a student writes, in the language of her everyday experience, in order to make discoveries and to take possession of what she reads.

Of course, we all want our students to make discoveries, to be motivated in tneir learning by what Jerome Bruner calls "quickened awareness and understanding."[4] And, we want them to recognize writing as a way of achieving this understanding. But we know these things won't happen simply because we want them to. In fact, much of our students' previous experience mitigates against these things happening at all. Many students, particulalry begining or underprepared writers, have done so little writing--perhaps only those short, intense moments of composing right before a paper is due--that they often have limited and limiting views of what writing can do for them. Their formal training may have stressed only communications skills: readability, clarity, and issues of style. Nothing wrong with a clear and stylish piece of writing; but there is more. There is the matter of language being useful to the user.

The expressive reading journal in the academic course depends for its usefulness on the nature of expressive language, that language which, as Britton explains it, "submits itself to the free flow of ideas and feelings"and is "relatively unstructured."[5] To an anxious student, whose main concern in the past has been to keep what's on the page neat and well organized, it's not going to look or sound like "real writing," the sort of stuff that gets done about serious subjects like science, history or economics. For such a writer, the main concern has been caution-- stay abstract, and for heaven's sake, <u>sound academic</u>. And further, the expressive journal is a place where students can record their struggle with new and confusing ideas. They can use writing as a way to tease out anomolies and inconsistencies; to make connections with what they know or suspect they know;to try out a guess; to make what Bruner calls "an interestingly wrong leap."[6] I see it as a tool to increase understanding and to stimulate learning, and yet it makes sense to me that some students might see it another way. For the begining or underprepared writer, it might look like a trap, another invitation to fail in writing, this time expressively.

How can we help our students recognize ways this "other kind" of writing can be useful to them in their academic courses? One thing seems clear: it is not enough to

simply assign "exploratory writing" or an "expressive reading journal" and hope for the best. Knowing the rudimentary mechanics of setting up a journal is a start, of course, but experience and our own common sense tell us that our students will recognize writing as a mode of learning, particularly learning in a formal academic context, only if we help them to through a process of socialization in which we provide both the instruction and the opportunity. In a way, this process of socialization is, or should be at the heart of any "Writing Across the Curriculum"program. What's important is not so much that students learn to "sound" like historians or psychologists, but that they use writing to understand what they read and hear in their history and psychology courses.

What I am going to describe now is a writing sequence developed in the University of Iowa writing lab which attempts to introduce students to writing as learning and which helps them begin an expressive reading journal. When a student comes to the U of I writing lab, she works with her own writing from the first day. There are no grammar books, no programmed texts, no diagnostic exams. Instead, in response to open invitations, students write as often and as much as they comfortably can during each one hour visit, setting aside, for the moment, concerns about correctness and organization. The goal is to make them feel free to say what they are thinking in writing, and the means of achieving that goal is expressive writing. Since fluency and self-confidence are major aims of this opening part of the sequence, the teacher makes a conscious effort to screen out errors or surface miscues in order to concentrate on what the writer is actually saying. The teacher begins a dialogue with the writer, questions, comments, requests for further information, all meant to encourage more writing. Eventually, even the least comfortable, least articulate writer comes to feel that he already has the competence to accomplish things with writing; he sees, perhaps for the first time, that he can think in writing.

Our students face immediate reading problems in their academic courses, and so the reading part of the sequence begins early in the semester. Since most of them are inexperienced and hesitant readers, we get them reading right away, and, like the writing,

the reading begins with the familiar. We begin with the campus newspaper, since most students see it as an important part of campus life, even those who just glance at it each morning before classes begin. Of course, since we're out to change passive readers into committed, careful readers, our tasks demand much more than a quick glance over morning coffee. "An Analysis of Your Campus Newspaper" asks students to explore the entire paper, reading enough of each article or editorial that seems interesting from its headline to find one that deserves a full written response. This regular reading and response become "A Daybook of Reflections," an informal reading journal in which talking back in writing to what they read becomes a habit. Again, the teacher responds with questions, comments, observations, all aimed at encouraging the writer to complicate and extend the initial response.

As this informal reading and talking back continues, students begin to gain confidence in themselves as readers and as people who can use writing to think about what they read. We quickly tap this growing confidence in order to attack the more difficult reading they face each day in academic texts, texts which for many students are massive vaults which lock away information they want and need to know. They read, but little happens. As one student said in his "Reading Autobiography," "It's like I'm pretending to read. I move my eyes, I turn the pages, but when I'm done my mind's a blank." What's missing for this reader? Just about everything it takes to stimulate learning, except the least effective motivation: fear. As Bruner says, "The longer and more packed the learning episode, the greater the pay off must be in terms of increased power and understanding."[7] What else is missing for this reader? What one might call a sense of personal committment to the act of learning. Michael Polanyi talks about the "personal participation of the knower in all acts of knowing." Into every genuine act of knowing, he asserts, "there enters a passionate contribution of the person knowing."[8] This "contribution," as he calls it, becomes "an acknowledgement of our personal responsibility for all of our knowledge" and a"recognition of the adventure that knowing involves."[9]

Of course, for that student sitting in the library pretending to read, there is no passion, no personal participation, and very little sense of adventure. The key for this reader, and for the many others like him, is , I believe, expressive language; it is expressive language which can put something of the learner at risk. As Britton points out, expressive discourse "encourages us to take risks, to try out ideas we are not sure of." [10] Expressive language, because it is verbalizing consciousness, can transform "objective," distant knowledge into what we might call "personal knowledge." Those bits of the world we can assimilate and accomodate in our everyday language become ours in a way that simple memorization or rote learning cannot achieve. Quite simply, the learner makes what is read a part of his individual "theory" of the world, a part of that symbolic representation we so casually call "reality." Which is not to say the expressive reading journal is an invitation to create some sort of private, totally subjective truth. As Polanyi insists:

> The personal participation of the knower in all acts of understanding does not make our understanding subjective. Comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity.[11]

To facilitate this active participation on the part of the learner, the reading sequence combines analytical strategies and the "talk-back" approach. In "Exploring a Difficult Textbook," students learn more about how to systematically attack a book; they learn how the book talks to them: table of contents, author's questions, chapter sub-headings, and so on. Finally, in "A Reading Journal for Mastering a Difficult Text," students begin to talk back to the book in writing. This is not a request for "reading notes," or a list of "key points." It is asking for written responses which "translate" what is being read into sentences and paragraphs, writing which can be revised and extended until teacher and student both feel that the writing suggests control over the concepts being discussed. Because this is a new way to think about writing and reading, students will often just repeat back huge chunks of text, or they will shift a few words around, repeating key terms. Here's a response to reading in

economics:

> This article spells out the major problems with industrial policy. The main problem with industrial policy is that the Democrats have made it a buzz word for 84. I think industrial policy is a very good alternative to Reagan's policies. The U.S. is the only major industrial nation without an industrial policy. Another problem with industrial policy is that the word socialism shows up with it. This is what will hurt industrial policy the most. I remember one thing from highschool economics class, and that is you can't have partial socialism. I think industrial policy can work but we have to be careful how it gets implemented.

It's as if this writer hoped that by chanting the key term its meaning would magically come to him. It won't. Not until he is able to "translate" the specialized term into his own words. In time, the terms and the concepts that they represent will feel less foreign to him, and he will, in time, be able to write and speak about industrial policy or any other economic issue with authority and responsibility.

Here is an entry from a journal in an Introduction to Literature course, written by a young man who was not, safe to say, an eager reader of poetry when the semester began. In fact, before this entry was written, he had not said a word in class discussions:

> The poem "A Mongoloid Child Handling Shells on the Beach" is interesting. I see the poem as taking a positive view of the child. He lets you know that the child is different, okay, but the cool thing is that he doesn't make you feel sorry for her. This kid is in its own little world--she finds joy in some very simple pleasures of life. In many ways, the kid is better off than the rest of us. She sees the small things our eyes never even pick up. They seem happy with their lives, and we seem happy with ours.

Well, he's probably still not an eager reader of poetry, but he did speak up in class about this poem. In this short entry, he was able to express, in his own words, a number of important ideas; he had, through expressive writing, taken the first step towards constructing a reasonably sophisticated interpretation of the poem, and he knew it. With the teacher's help, he fleshed out the missing details-- what are some of those "simple pleasures of life?"-- and he thought further about the subtle shift in focus he took as he moved from the subject of the poem, the child, to "they," all people who are different. Perhaps he would have come to this thought, or one like it, without the opportunity of the expressive reading journal, but I don't think so.

Whatever particular form it takes, and there are many possible, and whatever course at whatever level it is used in, the expressive reading journal demands from teachers a belief in the heuristic qualities of language; it demands that we help our students see themselves as people who can accomplish learning through writing. It also asks much of our students. Hard work. Faith in us and in themselves. In the University of Iowa writing lab, we talk frankly about what they must bring if the journal is to be of value:

> If you're willing to make the systematic and continuing effort recommended here, and if you attempt to answer all of the questions your teacher raises as he or she responds, you'll discover that writing about what you think you are learning is itself a way of learning.12

Notes

[1] Michael Polanyi, The Study of Man (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), p. 31

[2] James Britton, et al. The Development of Writing Abilities (London: Macmillian Education Ltd, 1975), p. 79.

[3] James Britton, "Words and a World," in Prospects and Retrospect (Montclair: Boyton/Cook Publishers, 1982), p. 82.

[4] Jerome Bruner, The Process of Education (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 68.

[5] Britton, Development of Writing Abilities

[6] Bruner, p. 51.

[7] Bruner, p. 51.

[8] Michael Polanyi, Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. vii.

[9] Richard Gelwick, The Way of Discovery: An Introduction to the Thought of Michael Polanyi (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 50.

[10] James Britton, "Notes on a Working Hypothesis about Writing," in Prospects, p. 124.

[11] Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, p. vii.

[12] All the materials described and quoted here were developed by Lou Kelly, Director of the University of Iowa writing lab.

A Writing Sequence for Developing an Expressive Reading Journal-- The University of Iowa Writing Lab

"A Reading Survey"	Asks for information about newspapers, magazines, etc. read on a regular basis. Also asks about books recently read, encouraging discussion of particular reading experiences, good or bad.
"An Autobiography of a Reader"	Asks students to write about "their reading lives," and about those experiences they feel have shaped their attitudes toward reading. Also, an invitation to discuss their particular reading tastes, strengths, or weaknesses.
"An Analysis of Your Campus Newspaper"	Begins the careful, regular reading and response to reading that will continue throughout the sequence. An emphasis on reading for details. Students choose articles or editorials to respond to in writing. In effect, they talk back to the writer.
"Reading and a Daybook of Reflections"	An informal journal in which students keep their personal accounts of what they read in the campus newspapers. Teacher/reader responds with questions, comments, requests for more information, always with an eye for extending the discussion of the reading.
"Exploring a Difficult Textbook"	Begins the careful, systematic analysis of a textbook by looking at key elements, how the book is talking to the reader: table of contents, chapter headings, author's questions, topic sub-headings.
"A Reading Journal for Mastering a Difficult Textbook"	Students talk back to their academic text after each reading episode; they question, speculate, test hypotheses, make connections with what they already know, all in the language of everyday experience. Teacher/reader works to help student avoid simply repeating back key terms or shifting a few words around. Students are encouraged to also include summaries of class lectures or discussions.